

How to Overcome Your Fear of the Unknown

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Humans are wired to fear the unknown. That's why uncertainty—whether at the macro level of a global economic, health, or geopolitical crisis or at the micro level (Will I get that job? Will this venture be successful? Am I on the right career path?)—can feel nerve-racking, exhausting, and even debilitating. However, that gut reaction leads people to miss a crucial fact: Uncertainty and possibility are two sides of the same coin. Consider the achievements you're most proud of, the moments that transformed your life, the relationships that make your life worth living. We'll bet that they all happened after a period of uncertainty—one that probably felt stressful but that you nevertheless pushed through to accomplish something great.

Our modern-day heroes all have a similar story. Nearly everyone initially thought that Elon Musk and his team would fail when they set out to revolutionize electric vehicles and push the world toward a more environmentally friendly future. They couldn't have achieved their breakthroughs if they had been afraid of uncertainty.

Uncertainty doesn't have to paralyze any of us. Over the past decade we have studied innovators and changemakers who've learned to navigate it well, and we've reviewed the research on topics like resilience and tolerance for ambiguity. The findings are clear: We all can become adept at managing uncertainty and empower ourselves to step confidently into the unknown and seize the opportunity it presents. Applying the following four principles will help you do that.

1. Reframe Your Situation

Most people are loss-averse. Multiple studies demonstrate that the way you frame things affects how you make decisions. The research shows, for instance, that if one treatment for a new disease is described as 95% effective and another as 5% ineffective, people prefer the former even though the two are statistically identical. Every innovation, every change, every transformation—personal or professional—comes with potential upsides and downsides. And though most of us instinctively focus on the latter, it's possible to shift that mindset and decrease our fear.

One of our favorite ways of doing this is the “infinite game” approach, developed by New York University professor James Carse. His advice is to stop seeing the rules, boundaries, and purpose of the “game” you're playing—the job you're after, the project you've been assigned, the career path you're on—as fixed. That puts you in a win-or-lose mentality in which uncertainty heightens your anxiety. In contrast, infinite players recognize uncertainty as an essential part of the game—one that adds an element of surprise and possibility and enables them to challenge their roles and the game's parameters.

Yvon Chouinard, the cofounder of Patagonia, is an infinite player. As a kid he struggled to fit in, running away from one school, almost failing out of a second, and becoming a “dirtbag” climber after he graduated. But rather than seeing himself as a failure, he recounts in his book *Let My People Go Surfing*, he “learned at an early age that it’s better to invent your own game; then you can always be a winner.”

Chouinard not only created one of the world’s most successful outdoor-apparel brands but also changed production norms by adopting more-sustainable materials, altered the retail model by refitting old buildings for new shops, and challenged traditional HR policies by introducing practices like on-site childcare. Some of those innovations created uncertainty for the business. For example, Patagonia adopted organic cotton before it became popular, when it was expensive and hard to source. When a financial downturn hit, outsiders encouraged the company to buy cheaper materials. But using organic cotton was in keeping with its values, so Patagonia persisted, despite the cost and the supply risks, and in the end grew its sales while its competitors saw their sales fall.

Chouinard has learned to face uncertainty with courage—and in fact to be energized by it—because he views his role as improving the game, not just playing it. “Managers of a business that want to be around for the next 100 years had better love change,” he advises in his book. “When there [is] no crisis, the wise leader...will invent one.”

2. Prime Yourself for New Risks

Although innovators often talk about eating uncertainty for breakfast, if you dig deeper, you discover some curious habits. When Paul Smith—a designer known for daring color combinations—travels, he always stays in the same hotel, often in the same room. Others we’ve studied book the same airplane seat for every flight, follow the same morning routine, or wear the same clothes. Steve Jobs had a lifetime supply of black turtlenecks.

All those habits provide balance. By reducing uncertainty in one part of your life, they prime you to tolerate more of it in other parts. Some people ground themselves with steady, long-term relationships, for instance. As the serial entrepreneur Sam Yagan, one of Time’s 100 most influential people and the former CEO of Match.com explains, “My best friends are from junior high and high school. I married my high school sweetheart. Given how much ambiguity I traffic in at work, I do look for less in other areas of my life.”

You can also prime yourself for uncertainty by getting to know the kinds of risk you have a natural aversion to or an affinity with. Case in point: Back when Nathan was pursuing a PhD in Silicon Valley and Susannah had started a clothing line that wasn’t yet making money, we had four children to support and were still living off student loans in a few hundred square feet of on-campus housing. At lunch one day, Nathan told his mentor, Tina Seelig, “Let’s face it, if I really had any courage, I would become an entrepreneur, but I’m just not a risk-taker.” Tina disagreed. She explained that there are many types of risks: financial, intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and so on. In Nathan’s situation, avoiding financial risk by pursuing a stable career as an academic—while still taking intellectual risks—was a prudent choice. The important lesson is that knowing which risks you tolerate well can help you see where to push more boldly into the

frontier, while knowing which you don't will help you prepare so that you can approach them with more confidence.

3. Do Something

Taking action is one of the most important parts of facing uncertainty, since you learn with each step you take. Research by Timothy Ott and Kathleen Eisenhardt demonstrates that most successful breakthroughs are produced by a series of small steps, not giant bet-the-farm efforts. Starting modestly can be more effective and less anxiety-provoking than trying to do everything at once.

Sometimes you need to quickly ramp up your learning to blow away the fog that obscures the view of what to do next. Entrepreneurs face that challenge all the time. [Research](#) on the most-effective start-up accelerators demonstrates that the best way to help founders meet it is to make them talk with as many people, from as many different backgrounds, as quickly as possible (instead of keeping their ideas to themselves for fear that someone might steal them). It's not unusual for invaluable input to come from unexpected corners.

4. Sustain Yourself

According to Ben Feringa, who won a Nobel Prize in chemistry for work on molecular machines that could one day power nanobots that repair the pipes in your house or keep diseases out of your blood, scientific discovery happens only after facing uncertainty. That means, he says, you have to “get resilient at handling the frustration that comes with it.” His approach includes both emotional hygiene (attending to emotions—much as you would a physical wound—so that they don't turn into paralyzing self-doubt or unproductive rumination) and reality checks (in which you recognize that failure is just part of the process).

Feringa admits that failing hurts and that he allows himself to feel frustrated, even for a few days. But then he stops and asks, What insights can I take away from this? What's the next step I can work on? Whether he realizes it or not, he's adopting one of many lenses that can help people recast setbacks, such as the learning lens (what you can learn from them), the gratitude lens (what you still have, not what you lost), the timing lens (it's just not the right time now, but that doesn't mean it won't ever be), and our favorite: the challenge lens (you become the hero only by facing obstacles).

Another practice that the scientists, creators, and entrepreneurs we've studied use to sustain themselves is to focus on the people and things that have meaning for them. You can get through anything—not just the fear of potential losses but the pain of real ones—by holding tight to what really matters.

Conclusion:

Resilience—being able to take a blow and stay standing—is important. But we argue for something more: learning to transform uncertainty into opportunity. The only way for any of us

to tap into new possibilities is through the gateway of the unknown. And it doesn't have to be a painful process if you believe in your ability to navigate it. Our hope is that you can use our advice to transform your relationship with change and inspire others to do the same.

Nathan Furr and Susannah Harmon Furr are the authors of The Upside of Uncertainty (Harvard Business Review Press, 2022), from which this article is adapted.